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## THE VALUE OF HISTORY IN THE FORMATION OF CHARACTER

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How dearly we all love a story! From the time a child can listen at all he rejoices in some simple tale. Over and over the same thing is demanded, with no variation allowed to the narrator; it must be just the same day after day, or something is lacking to the childish mind. And what is history but the tale of the world? The story of our race, "Geschichte" the Germans call it frankly, the story, the tale which includes all tales. It is strange that the word story has a double significance. It may be a true or a false story. Something has grown into the word of the diverse personalities of the tellers of tales. The story is told in part only by each narrator; one may contradict the other; one may present a false picture, a distorted report, and another the unvarnished truth. It is no wonder that many writers of history fell into disrepute, that fables and stories were supposed to constitute the whole of history. The tale depends so much upon the teller. Is he fair? Is he clear in his perceptions? Is he unbiased in his judgments, having no theory to maintain, simply zealous for the truth? These are moral questions we ask, these are the questions which are more important to the value of historical work than any learning. "It was well noted by that worthy gentleman Sir Philip Sydney," says Raleigh, "that historians do borrow of poets, not only much of their ornament but somewhat of their substance."<sup>1</sup> And Lord Bacon defines the office of the historian: "It is," he says, "to represent the events themselves together with the counsels, and to leave the observations and conclusions there-upon to the liberty and faculty of every man's judgment."<sup>2</sup> Bacon thus throws the moral responsibility directly upon the readers, not the writers of history.

<sup>1</sup> RALEIGH, *The History of the World*.      <sup>2</sup> BACON, *Advancement of Learning*.

But the old reproach, that historians wrote entirely from their own point of view, is rapidly passing away. One may be recommended to read Macaulay more for the style than for the history. But the method pursued in Guizot's *History of Civilization* has obtained a larger and larger following, and the modern historian, basing his work on actual documents and certified records, while he makes perhaps less brilliant reading, certainly gives a more unbiased version of facts. More and more the science of history is developing, as people go to the sources and foundations rather than rely on tradition and picturesque statement. Great tendencies are coming to be looked for, more than isolated facts. History is no longer a list of names and an array of dates, but a series of living principles, a moral tendency running through events which are strung upon one main string like the beads on a rosary. More and more our historians are becoming profound moralists. This, indeed, is almost inevitable, for any deeper search into the facts of history is an inquiry into the meaning of things. The facts spring from the inner necessity of the time of their being, and the philosophical inquirer must look deeper than the surface appearance.

We have lately lost a very distinguished example of the teacher not only of history but of morals, and of the vital connection existing between the two. Eminent as were Mr. John Fiske's qualifications as a historian—painstaking and accurate in his research, brilliant and lucid in his presentation—it was yet his profound moral convictions which illuminated his work and gave it its great value. What a splendid monument he has left—beginning with the *Discovery of America*, tracing the influence of *Old Virginia* and her neighbors, and the *Beginnings of New England*, through the *American Revolution* and the *Critical Period of American History*, taking in as a side light the *Dutch Contribution to the Development of America*, and finally ending with the *Growth of the Mississippi*—what a great and continuous work he has left! The very enumeration of the titles of his books shows the grasp that he had on the subject. But greater even than these are some of the books he wrote showing his profound appreciation of the destiny of man. It was this *Destiny of Man*,

viewed in the light of his origin, which enabled him to set forth these great world movements. It was his profound conviction of the worth of man's life which gave the work of man's life its supreme value in his eyes. Through Nature to God was his constant theme. His important philosophical books are brief, and the bulk of his philosophical writings not so great as his historical work, but its influence upon his day and generation has been most profound.

I was in England at the time of his death, and was much interested to see the English comments. The great dailies, of course, had some adequate idea of his work, at least as far as the enumeration of the titles of his books. But one of the most appreciative of the notices was in a non-conformist weekly of large and influential circulation in Great Britain. This spoke of his *Destiny of Man* and of his work as a devout Darwinist with the greatest respect, dwelling upon him as a profound philosopher, and ending with some such sentence as this: "He is said to have written historical books, but we have not seen them." It made one smile to think what fame is in another country, because to us certainly the bulk of John Fiske's work is his historical work rather than his philosophical.

But the point I want to make is that the true historian must be a philosopher, and if a philosopher, then an inquirer into moral tendencies, into the great drift and trend of national life. This principle must run through all the work of any genuine historian. We are a little in danger in this country of exalting our own history, which is after all local, of forgetting that we are part of the whole. Of course it is necessary to teach our young people American history, and the great events which have led to our being what we are. But we are only one link in the chain of events. We have only advanced freedom and liberty to its highest degree along the line which was prepared for us as early as the Reformation. To teach a child anything like the proper place of America in the history of the world seems to me one of the great tasks which our schools should try to fulfil. Of course this cannot be done quickly. The idea of continuity, however, is an idea which can be given at the very beginning of

any historical study. We are too apt to take up the study of history in mosaic fashion, here a bit and there a bit, quite carefully worked over and prepared, but without any idea of how it fits together. The study of Roman history has become one of the requirements, lately, for entrance examinations, and it seems to me a most valuable addition to college entrance requirements. Roman law, after all, is the foundation of all our jurisprudence, and though the real historian may say that in choosing Rome as a starting point we are making an arbitrary choice, and that we should go back into the far East and into the dim recesses of time, yet, after all, the Roman civilization is the first civilization of which we can have much definite knowledge, and, therefore, is a convenient and a safe starting-point for all subsequent historical work.

This is not the time to consider the relations of national character to national history. The history has grown out of the development of character, and character conversely has been molded by the history of the nation. We think of Switzerland as a synonym for freedom, and the Swiss have been nurtured on the recital of the deeds of their forefathers. The Scottish people, too, with their devotion of loyalty, their keenness and shrewdness learned in many a border warfare, and many a fight for a losing cause, are an example of what the history of their nation has made them. Who that hears "Bonnie Charlie" sung as it can be sung in Scotland, but is touched by that longing for the unattainable which is the blessing and the despair of the idealist?

Will you no' come back again ?  
Better lo'ed ye canna be,  
Will ye no' come back again ?

The whole episode is summed up in a few verses of a song, perhaps the most potent result of that ill-starred attempt. For in this all the highest emotions of a patriot find play. It was the literal Prince Charlie to whom the people looked as their best good, it is now all devotion and loyalty to all good things that speaks in the touching refrain of a song universally beloved.

But the special theme for this evening is the "Relation of

the Study of History to the Formation of Character," and it seems to me, in a country such as our own, with a population made up of diverse elements, where the force of tradition is of necessity limited—where, indeed, in many parts of the country we are making traditions, so far as civilization is concerned—that the study of history as a contribution to the formation of a sound and useful character is of the utmost importance. We are in danger of exalting the new unduly. There are countries bound by custom, where "as it was, is now, and ever shall be," is the height of man's ambition. Of Infinite Perfection alone can this be said, and in our haste for improvement, we rush to the other extreme, often thinking that because a thing is new it must be better than what went before. Here historical study comes in as a corrective. Often we find the thing that we thought new only an old project under a slightly different aspect. As an instance of what I mean, I mention a paper of 1780, which in its own neighborhood had some effect in the agitation for the establishment of the gold standard in 1893 and 1894. All through the closing years of the eighteenth century Rhode Island was plunged in financial difficulties by the successive issues of paper money which it had no means of redeeming. The declaration to which I refer records on oath that a certain Colonel Segar made a tender of \$2,100 to Mr. William Knowles, of South Kingstown, to discharge two bonds and a note, but that "Knowles refused to take the same, saying that he would not take such trash as that was, but if said Samuel Segar would pay him in the same sort of money the said Segar had of said Knowles, he would take it." With this declaration the paper money tendered in payment was found, the whole making an impressive lesson in the evils of an inflated currency. One is apt to exclaim with Solomon that there is no new thing under the sun, in spite of our eager quest, and to believe that the past, if duly searched, could always furnish analogies and precedents for the present. We must know the past as a guide to the future, for not only does the study of history give a firm foundation for growth, but furnishes actual instances, full of helpful suggestion.

There is no virtue we need to cultivate more than that of

patriotism. America is a fair new world, and she welcomes many sons. What does she do with them? We are learning to our bitter grief that it is not enough to receive them, to give them free air to breathe; they must be trained. The seeds of oppression and wrong sown in Poland and Russia may bear their bitter fruit fostered by our genial sun. The whole nation has been stirred to its very heart to see that this is possible. Given light and air, we had fondly supposed that anarchy and revenge would hide their heads and quickly die. And they will; the forces of good are sure to win in the end; and the costly sacrifice which has just been laid on the altar of freedom will hasten that end. But have we no responsibility? Should not the schools redouble their efforts? Should not the teachers of history especially draw lessons from the lives of patriots and leaders of the people which shall inspire a love of country, a pride in our native land, and a cheerful acquiescence in her laws? We are led by example rather than precept; and hero-worship is a safe channel for the youthful imagination. Cannot our best men be made to live again before the minds of school children to stimulate and incite them to the practice of their virtues?

You remember Browning's account of the chairs and tables his father piled together for the siege of Troy, set him atop for Priam,

. . . . called our cat  
Helen, enticed away from home he said  
By wicked Paris, who crouched somewhere close  
Under the footstool, being cowardly,  
But whom,—since she was worth the pains, poor puss,—  
Towzer and Tray, our dogs, the Atreidai, sought,  
By taking Troy to get possession of.  
This taught me who was who, and what was what.  
So far I rightly understood the case  
At five years old; a huge delight it proved  
And still proves, thanks to that instructor sage,  
My father, who knew better than turn straight  
Learning's full flare on weak-eyed ignorance.

This, indeed, is the ideal method, to capture the young imagination, to give it noble and fine pictures to dwell upon, to lead the child's mind to the perception of truth and beauty. With

the whole story of the world to choose from there can hardly be any lack of material. A wise teacher must select and present to his scholars what arouses his own enthusiasm. One fine spirit can literally inspire many others.

And if patriotism can be inculcated by a study of history, no less so can personal honor. Who can say how great an effect the romances of Sir Walter Scott have had in holding up pure and true characters to admiration, and in exposing the futility as well as the evils of a career of duplicity and deceit. The modern historical novel, with its quicker movement and more terse style, fulfils its object in presenting a living picture of the time no better than the more leisurely tales of the great northern writer. Our own American historians have told their stories without the adventitious aids of romance, and yet have given us fascinating books, full of the deepest interest. The pages of Parkman need no embellishment of fiction to hold the closest attention. Scholarship and beauty of style are both exemplified by Motley, and John Fiske presents us one leader after another in clearly defined and exquisite portraiture. Surely from these storehouses our young people have treasures the value of which they have not fully appreciated; examples of right living and high thinking which should become part of the mental furniture of each scholar.

But to come to a more particular consideration of the effect of historical study upon character, I should say in the first place that it demands absolute accuracy. Even if historical study is pursued in the old dry-as-dust fashion, this mental habit must be fostered. There are still some people who regard long lists of the kings of England and a string of dates as being the sum of historical study. Partial as this view is, it has an element of truth, for the dates are pegs to hang our hats on—are very necessary for all subsequent and wider study. And learning them is good mental discipline. This accuracy lies at the foundation of character. Truth, exact truth, in so far as it can be learned, becomes the aim of the scholar. The accuracy which historical study teaches is of especial value in such a community as ours, where the ordinary forms of speech run to humorous



exaggeration. Who has not seen a child puzzled by some fanciful speech of an older person, not knowing whether to take it seriously or not? Such surprising things are true, one cannot wonder that the youthful imagination will accept the wildest statements. We are as a people careless in our ordinary conversation, loving hyperbole and suggestion. This gives piquancy and flavor to our intercourse with each other, and is delightful as a play of fancy, giving a shining and a pleasant surface to society, but there must be a depth of current underneath these sparkling waves of thought, or the shallows become painfully apparent. A sound and accurate basis of fact is the first and foremost contribution which historical study makes to the cultivated man.

To the accuracy which such study teaches, perseverance must be added. All study, no matter how delightful, has its drudgery. We must pursue for the sake of the end in view very often, not for the pleasure of the immediate moment. This is hard to make a child realize. He must simply do the work assigned him obediently, leaving the end to be gained out of sight; an end which his parents and teachers can appreciate, but which he cannot yet see. Accuracy and perseverance must enter into all study, but without them historical study is impossible. These two are certainly moral qualities most desirable to foster, most essential to the growth of a strong character. And with these two comes the use of the imagination. In childhood the imagination is particularly strong. A little child often has no idea of what we call truth. The external world has not yet become real. Its own thoughts, its own fancies are quite as real to it. The distinction between "I did" and "I thought" does not yet exist. The external world takes hold slowly. This power of imagination which a child has can be trained and developed, and there are few better ways to do it than by historical reading. Here a basis is given for the play of the imagination. The child is not allowed to dissipate his fancies; there is some solid foundation; his thought, like a falcon, is held in leash and sent after its quarry.

These qualities of accuracy, perseverance, and proper control

of the imagination all come into play at a little later period of historical work from that of which I have just been speaking, when a student is able to take up a problem for himself. It seems to me a most valuable thing to have a young student see for himself the sources of history. This can be done in most of our New England towns by an actual visit to the town record office. Dry and musty papers which are so dear to the heart of a historian may seem very prosaic and trivial to the young student ; but give him a problem to work out, and let him find the real uses of the papers, and they quickly acquire a charm, and open the recesses of the past to him with an enchanter's wand. In one school I know distinct problems have been set in local history—as to the existence of slavery, for instance, in that particular township ; an inquiry as to the methods of apprenticeship, or the export of certain crops could be made, of which records can be obtained in the office of the town clerk. The records that I am most familiar with are in the keeping of a town clerk elected to that office for many years, so that he has a personal pride and delight in the work. Nothing is more interesting to the young student than to be allowed to take down a volume of records of the eighteenth century kept in the fine clerical hand of the period, and under the legal phraseology and cumbersome repetition of names to discover the truth for which he is seeking. In this particular record office there are deeds of gift from Samuel Sewall to the town, and I never shall forget the delight with which the discovery was finally made of the actual site and the actual conditions under which the meeting-house lot was presented to the town.

In all such study the qualities which I have spoken of, unflinching accuracy never passing beyond the bounds of truth, steady perseverance to pursue the end sought ; and then a trained imagination enabling the student from bare facts to reconstruct the past, to form some rational theory as to why the man who made the deed did so, what his motives must have been, and how the final act was accepted by his neighbors ; all this involves and implies high capacity, and moral as well as intellectual power.

The traveler in foreign countries notices this pride of locality. What Scotchman will not tell you the story of a border warfare or some midnight raid? How the Rhine teems with legends and tales of barons and knights! How replete is the storied land of Italy with interest and tales that appeal to the imagination! Our own history, so far as it concerns the occupation of America by the Caucasian race, is brief, but it has its heroic episodes, and one of the great missions of the history teacher is to gather from this story. Unfortunately, where there is short continuity of family life, tradition, and legend, the penumbra of historic fact, is sadly interrupted. It is this which gives poetry and charm to the life of a people. We, in New England, are far richer in this respect than any of our neighbors, with the possible exception of the Virginians. Here the bond to the old country is strongest; here the very names of our towns recall the counties of England; Gloucester and Plymouth, and the west country names appear on our barren east shore. By no great stretch of the imagination we find our places in our English homes as well as in our homes of New England, and I would caution our teachers of local history to try to make this connection. Without this we are in danger of regarding ourselves too much from an isolated point of view; we become excrescences on the growth of the world rather than an integral part of it; an island set in the world's current, rather than a contributing stream. And in magnifying our own local history, let us not forget the general history of our country. While the Revolution was being fought on the eastern coast, a peaceful revolution was going on in the west, on the slopes of the Pacific, where the olive and the orange and the vine were being planted by pious hands, and a peaceful and mighty revolution in the old order of nature was taking place. When the Pilgrim fathers were landed in the East, already Spanish missionaries had penetrated beyond our present southern border, and were scattering the seeds of Spanish civilization in what was to be our great western country. A little later the French came down from the North, meeting the civilization creeping up the great river, the artery of the new world, so that from many and diverse sources

our present civilization has grown. New England was an important factor in this, but it becomes us New Englanders to be modest and recognize the origin of the other streams which have poured their life-blood into our present commonwealth.

In addition to the mental training to which the study of history should contribute, there are other great moral lessons which it should teach. First, I would mention that the study of history inculcates the rule of law. Any wise study of history cannot fail to bring out in bold relief the necessity and wisdom of submitting to law, and the inexorability of the law itself. Consequences follow unerringly upon the breaking of any of the great laws. Marie Antoinette was beheaded. This in itself is an isolated fact without special significance to the young student's mind. Let him inquire into the causes of this event; let him understand something of the condition of the French people before the Revolution—of their rights trampled upon, of the arrogant assumption of power by the nobles—and he will see that some such fact as this was the logical outcome of the conditions; that the great law of the sovereignty of the people must assert itself; that it could not be kept under. There have been triumphs of injustice, there have been times of terrible misrule, but the reign of law has been vindicated, the results of anarchy have been overthrown.

And in a country like ours, reverence is another virtue which history teaches us, and which we are in especial need of learning. We are apt to see the humorous side of things too clearly. The typical American hides his feelings under some light and flip-pant exclamation. We are hardly old enough yet to dare to be as reverent as we truly are. It takes poise and security of one's own position to be absolutely simple, for simplicity, far from being the simple thing that seems, often comes to us through complexity. It is history and historical study which should teach us reverence. For is not reverence at the foundation of all respect? To respect the rights of others which lies at the foundation of all true democracy, one must have a reverent spirit, a spirit which can see and revere all that is good and right, though presented in very varying conditions, and with no adven-

titious aids of outward circumstance. "A man's a man for a' that" lies at the root of free institutions. In respect for the life of men, in reverence for the aims of the spirit of man, history is best qualified to instruct us. It is the life of the great men who have gone before us which is our greatest inspiration. Their life and their character still live in the world. We who have come after can only accept what is good in them with devout thankfulness, and try to imitate their virtues.

And the highest and best of all the teachings of history should be reverence for truth. Truth is so many-sided; she veils her face behind so many veils. But what can be more inspiring than the search for truth? As we see a little further, as we redouble our efforts to find her, do we not receive the highest reward and the highest incentive to our study? The whole of life is so closely woven together that what seems an isolated event is of vital importance and connection with what goes before and what comes after. To see a little farther, to trace some unknown connection, what greater reward can any study offer, what higher satisfaction? As the painter before his landscape sees more and more of beauty, as to his trained eye the shadows become full of living color, and his subject glows with more than the light of day, as exquisite relations and unseen beauties reveal themselves, so with the historical student. The period of his study becomes vital with living interest. Facts group themselves about the central events, side lights are thrown by contemporary documents, truth becomes more lovely and more alluring as the ultimate foundations recede before the eager search, and hide themselves in the mysterious recesses of the human will. But to gain one little point, to establish one small link in the great chain of the growth of the world, what delight can be keener, what quest more honorable? For "what has been ever shall be," better, larger, more inclusive. Good in by-gone days may not be just our good, but its quality cannot change, though we spell it differently. We must be saved because we cling

To the same, same self, same love,  
Same God; ay, what was shall be.

It is the passion for truth which is the scholar's passion, and the promise of truth which is the scholar's highest reward. If we look for truth in times that have gone by; if we look for it in the history of our own place and our own local habitation, shall we not reverence it more and more in our own lives? Shall we not appreciate that we too are making history, and that we must make it on the side of righteousness?

Is this too much to expect of the study of history? It should give a background for the whole of life, it should furnish a working theory of the advance of the world. It is not a fixed science; constant contributions are made to it by research and by philosophy. New schools are constantly arising among its votaries, but its basis is on fact, and its growth is the growth of the life of man. It teaches us great lessons, lessons at the foundation of right thinking and right living, the immutability of law, reverence, and the love of truth. These are lessons worth the learning, lessons which carry their reward with them in the promise of future growth and achievement. These are lessons woven into the very texture of freedom, without which there can be no stability. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."